No. 56

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

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The blare of the brass instruments rose shrilly. The pianist was perspiring freely. The swell of the sound became a tumult, and the dance became a merry carnival.
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Chapter 183

MR. JAMISON

BETTY PROCTER'S existence had lost some of its drabness. It was something distinctly worth while to have a friend who believed in her. Harold Wayne's frequent calls were always a source of pleasure. They had a loyal supporter in Mrs. Armond, who had not forgotten the miscarried romance of her own life.

She had learned to love Betty almost like a daughter, and she had always admired Wayne.

While Betty was rather discouraged for a time, she refused to give up the idea of some day appearing behind the footlights as a dancer or an actress. Something seemed to tell her that her fortune lay in that direction.

She tried to forget her first disappointment and vowed never to place her faith again in a man like Farrel. This time she decided to appeal to theatrical managers of a well-known reputation.

After a consultation with Mrs. Armond she placed an application with several theatrical managers of repute. She wrote to Mr. Belasco, Mr. Shubert and Mr. Brady.

In these applications she set forth her qualifications and asked for a trial.

One morning she was agreeably surprised to get a letter from Mr. Brady. He acknowledged the receipt of her application and asked her to state when she could come to his office for an interview.

She replied immediately, saying that she would

call the following afternoon.

With the letter from Mr. Brady in her purse, she sauntered forth, new hope in her heart.

At the hour set she entered Mr. Brady's office and was told to wait. As she sat in the waiting room she noticed a number of young women lounging indolently in big, comfortable chairs.

There were several doors, but the one which attracted her was the one which had the word "Private" marked on the frozen glass panel.

Suddenly this door was opened, and a well dressed gentleman came out.

At the first glance she found his features strangely familiar. He wore a pair of smoked glasses, which hid his eyes.

It was this which prevented Betty from recognizing him.

The man passed leisurely through the waiting room, glanced at every girl, then walked back to the private office.

A moment later a dapper young man appeared. He approached Betty with a smile.

"Come with me, please," he said.

She rose quickly and followed him.

He preceded her into the private office, which was handsomely furnished. At a big flat-top desk sat a man, whose face was averted as she entered.

And he did not turn until the young man had left, closing the door behind him.

The very instant their eyes met, she gave a start. Recognition had come complete. He was none other than Mr. Jamison, the man she had never hoped to see again.

Betty, pale and trembling, stood there and stared at him who had offered her a deadly insult.

"You——" she gasped at last and turned as if to

flee.

"Don't go—please, don't," Mr. Jamison called out. "At least give me a chance to say a few words to you."

There was something in his voice that impelled her to remain.

"Come, take a seat, Miss Procter," he told her with a smile that was not offensive.

She obeyed him silently.

For a little while he drummed on the desk with his fingers. His gaze, as it rested on her lovely young face, held an expression that was both, apologetic and kind.

"You are no doubt surprised to see me here, are you not?" he began at last.

"I am," she admitted.

"And you are not glad to see me, Miss Procter?"

"Could you expect me to be?"

"No—hardly, after——" he paused in evident confusion.

"I was under the impression that you had left New York," Betty said, breaking the awkward silence.

"So I did," Mr. Jamison responded like a man who is anxious to face a difficult task and have it over with. "I was away for a short while, but something brought me back."

He stopped, his eyes meeting hers humbly. "I wonder if you would believe me if I were to tell you what brought me back, and why I am here."

"I—I don't know," the girl faltered. "I might find it hard to believe anything you say since——"

"Don't say it, please don't," he held up his hand, exhorting her to keep silent upon the subject she was about to approach. "I have learned my lesson, and I am heartily ashamed of myself."

Betty looked at him, astounded.

"Do you really mean that?" she queried.

"I do, from the bottom of my heart, Miss Procter, I honestly do."

He held out his hand, but she refused to take it.

"Very well," he said in a tone of resignation. "I don't blame you."

Another space of silence fell.

"Miss Procter," he spoke presently. "Will you listen to a man who is anxious to make amends."

"Go on, I am listening," Betty replied.

Mr. Jamison leaned back in the chair, swung half way around and faced her.

"To begin with," he said, his voice toned down, "I want you to know that I am deeply sorry for the wrong I did you. I am a rich man, and idle rich men sometimes lose sight of the better and more noble things in life.

"They crave pleasures that mean the moral destruction of others. I have been guilty of that. Yes, I am ashamed to confess that I have been guilty of that.

"Perhaps I would still be indulging in that sort of thing ,if I had not met you. Now don't smile that way. God, girl, I want you to believe me. And you will, before I get through."

Betty's incredulous and almost mocking smile had suddenly disappeared. Her fingers were twitching nervously.

"That day," Jamison continued, "I was a fiend in everything the word implies. I don't like to recount the details. You know them. Your pluck saved you. When you shot me through the shoulder, I was tremendously surprised.

"No other girl ever took the trouble to go to that extreme, although that loaded revolver always lay where you found it.

"Had you killed me, it would have been a well deserved punishment. But the plucky fight you put up did not impress me half as much as what you did afterward.

"You went to the telephone and called up a physician residing in the neighborhood. It happened to be Dr. Hamilton, a very dear and old friend of mine.

"The bullet had separated an artery, and I suppose I would have bled to death if it had not been for his timely arrival.

"Naturally I was surprised to see him. And mighty glad, too. When I asked him who called him, he told me he did not know, but that it was a woman's voice. I guessed at once that it was you.

"Of course, he wanted to know who shot me. I would not tell him. The room was in a rather disordered condition. He glanced about and nodded.

" 'You better give up that sort of thing, old man,' he said to me.

" 'What?' I asked.

" 'Luring girls into your house,' he said, looking me squarely in the eyes. 'Now don't deny it, for I know. You are misapplying your wealth. You could spread sunshine and happiness, but instead you create misery and wretchedness. I am ashamed of you.'

"Well, Dr. Hamilton gave me a lecture such as I never had in all my life. He made me see your noble, womanly character. He pointed out to me that you had spared my life twice.

"All that night I lay awake thinking it over. Something awoke within me of whose existence I had always been somewhat hazy — my conscience. By degrees my eyes were opened to something I had never thought of before.

"And I made a solemn vow to change my mode of living and make amends as far as was possible. Once

that vow was made, I was absolutely determined to keep it and I have.

"A day or two later I was visited by a young man whose name I did not learn. He had a rather forceful method in urging me to leave New York. And he came for the unmistakable purpose of giving me a sound thrashing.

"He was man enough not to touch me when he noticed my crippled condition. Well, I did leave the city for a while, but returned as soon as I was able to take care of myself.

"I was determined to find you. And I wanted to do something for you without you knowing its source. Through a certain agency I found where you lived. Before I could carry out the plan I had in mind, kind fate took a hand.

"As it happens, Mr. Brady is a devoted friend of mine. Quite by accident I saw your application lying on his desk.

"He does not know how you and I came to know each other. I told him that you were the daughter of a poor relative of mine, and asked him to give you a chance.

"I want you to accept it. And I also want you to go to Palowski, the famous Russian dancing master. I have already made arrangements with him.

"I am going to stand in back of you as a real friend this time. You have the ability and the pluck. In three months you will be the rage in New York. You'll have them all at your feet, Miss Procter. Will you accept what I offer you?"

As Jamison finished speaking he leaned toward the girl.

There was no longer that relentless look that had made women tremble and be afraid of him.

Instead there was an expression of pleading and kindliness that did not fail to impress Betty.

But she was still a trifle skeptic.

"What do you expect in return for all this?" she asked.

"Your forgiveness, Miss Procter. Nothing more."

Her eyes were searching his.

"Do you mean that, Mr. Jamison?"

"God knows I mean it," came back fervently. "And I never wanted anything so bad in all my life."

The girl was considering.

Her gaze still held a little doubt, but by degrees her blue orbs cleared and shone. His hand was extended and she slipped hers into it.

"I believe you are sincere," she said with a tremor in her voice. "And I'll forgive you."

The words were uttered with childish simplicity and trust. Mr. Jamison, under the stress of some great emotion, sat there with his head bowed.

His chin sank lower and lower until his face rested on the arm flung across the desk.

His broad shoulders were quivering, and Betty knew that he was weeping.

For fully five minutes the room was silent. Into the girl's heart something awakened that had been drugged by bitter experience. It was faith.

When Jamison finally raised his head and looked at her, his cheeks were wet.

"I am thankful to you for accepting my offer," he said somewhat huskily. "From now on my life shall be devoted to the uplifting of your sex. When new dangers beset you, come to me. If you have forgotten my address, here is my card."

He took a neatly engraved card from his purse and handed it to her.

"Don't be afraid to come to me, Miss Procter," he added, again taking her hand in his. "Mr. Brady will be here in a few minutes. If he should ask any questions, just tell him that you are a distant relative of mine. I don't want him to know——"

"I understand," she interrupted when he halted.

Jamison rose and reached for his hat and cane.

"Tomorrow I expect you to begin your lessons," he said as he turned to the door. "I suggest that you call at my house and I will take you to Palowski and introduce you to him."

Betty nodded her assent smilingly.

"Thank you, sir," she responded softly. "I will come."

He left the private office hurriedly.

Chapter 184

THE WOOING

A NEW STAR loomed on the theatrical horizon. It had sprung up overnight, it seemed. The name "Betty" blazed forth in a big electric display on Broadway. It was not necessary to ask who Betty was. At the clubs such a question would have brought a disdainful smile at your display of ignorance.

Everyone who kept informed as to the latest events in theatrical stardom knew Betty and had seen her dance.

And those who saw her once returned for another glimpse at the most graceful, the most beautiful exponent of the terpsichorean art in New York.

Betty Procter proved an instantaneous hit. And a new life began to dawn for her. She still lived with Mrs. Armond and Harold Wayne was still her devoted slave.

Mr. Jamison, true to his word, had indeed become her loyal friend. After every performance he insisted upon taking her home in his car until Betty, fearing that his attentions might be misconstrued, asked him to discontinue this.

But she made this request not only for appearances' sake. There was a young man who suffered terribly whenever he saw Betty with Mr. Jamison.

This young man was Harold Wayne.

And as the weeks passed by, his mental suffering grew, for he was beginning to realize that the much admired Betty was slipping through his fingers.

For one thing, Wayne was not an arduous lover. His was the mute adoration which is sometimes exasperating in its utter lack of outward demonstration. He would gladly have laid down his life for her had she asked it.

Ambition had suddenly taken a secure hold of Betty Procter. And with the coming of ambition thoughts of marriage were crowded into the back-ground. It seemed she had become wedded to her art.

It was amid the gay chatter of a crowd in one of the dance restaurants where Wayne had taken her after the show that he told her again how dearly he loved her.

Betty did something then she had never done before. She laughed in his face.

The young man's soul was afire from the spark of Betty's magic personality, which had fallen fresh upon him as he watched her performance an hour before.

And now he was moved to the speech which he had repeated so many times. He wanted her to set the happy day and she put him off as she had done on several occasions before.

There was a deliberate taunt in her smile as she leaned back in her chair and gazed upon him through eyes half closed. Her lips were full and seemed always to be slightly pouting.

Many times he had been angry with her for turning him down, but he could not resist her sweet feminine wiles.

He had not tired of her and that was her triumph.

As it was late when she finished her dance, she had not dressed carefully after changing her make-up, and there was a hint of abandon in her appearance—particularly in the arrangement of her heavy auburn hair.

Those who saw Betty dance, her glorious hair hanging free, knew its profusion and admired its golden

bronze color.

Harold Wayne had spoken very low and very wistfully, with more tenderness and reverent yearning in his words and voice than he had thought himself capable of.

But the girl had only laughed, and leaned back, and played with the glass before her. She was drinking a beverage that fizzed.

"I want you to marry me," he repeated.

"You don't really mean it, Harold," she told him.

The young man winced at that.

"You know I mean it, dear," he replied imploringly.

But she remained unmoved.

"Why should I marry you?" she questioned archly, laughing again.

The laugh bore a sting.

Because of his great reverence for her, because of the idolatry that marked his regard for her, he had abased himself before her.

And now that she had laughed at him, refusing to take seriously all that he had said over and over again, he felt humiliated.

Then he realized with a pang that he would gladly say it all over again, even to endure her laughter, because he loved her so.

"Let us be sensible, Harold," she said, shaking her head and holding up her glass. "I am an actress and it is dangerous undertaking for a really nice young man like you to marry a girl like me.

"To be perfectly frank, I like you too well to think of you as a husband. I suppose I'll remain wedded to my art."

He was not able to find much comfort in that; yet, it pleased him to know that she liked him at least.

"I have a nice business of my own now," he de-

clared very earnestly after a pause. "I could give you all the pretty things you like so well. I'll wait for you until you——"

Another laugh made him stop and his face paled a trifle.

"You and I have been such good friends ever since we met," she told him. "Why soil a beautiful friendship by marrying."

Wayne could not see any humor in that, although Betty's eyes were dancing mischievously.

Then he decided that he would be patient, and win his desire by continuing to be her friend and comrade and hold her thus until the mood for surrender should come upon her.

The orchestra began playing a snappy fox-trot.

"Let's dance," she suggested.

"Alright," came back quickly. "Come."

They stepped briskly out amid the gathering crowd on the floor. Already he felt the spirit for his new role strong within him.

The music was irresistible. The orchestra leader's long hair streamed wildly with his efforts to urge his men to a more furious tempo.

The snare-drummer crouched, half sitting, half standing. He was putting all he had into the crescendo rattle of his drum.

The blare of the brass instruments rose shrilly, too. The pianist was perspiring freely. The swell of the sound became a tumult, and the dance a merry carnival.

Someone pulled a string, and from traps above confetti showered down upon the dancers.

Carried away by the eager spirit, the wild spirit of it all, the girl shouted. Betty was once more her old happy self.

Harold Wayne, whirling with her in that mad

dance, felt a sense of elation.

"Ah, this is great," he said with a sigh.

He thought he was whispering it, but instead he screamed, under stress of the moment.

Then, breathless and dizzy with dancing and laughing, they were seated again.

Betty's hands went to her hair for swift adjustment; and just in time, too, for it threatened to tumble down over her shoulders.

Her cheeks were flaming and her eyes were swimming in tears from her happy laughter.

"Harold—oh, Harold!" she gasped ecstatically.

He pulled at a stray wisp of her hair, like a boy teasing a girl. She slapped his hand and both laughed again.

Then upon Betty's frank announcement that she was thirsty they had another drink, and, like two children, took sips from each other's glass, oblivious of a hundred eyes upon them.

Harold Wayne thought the right moment had come for him to make another attempt to storm her heart.

"We could have a great time together—always, Betty," he suggested.

Like a madcap girl she ran away from him to a seat at the next table. From there she shook her finger at him.

He arose and followed her.

"Don't come," she cried. "Don't come near me until you are willing to talk about something else besides love and marriage."

In just such a manner a maiden of sixteen, ignorant of love, might have answered the advances of a chum suddenly turned to sweetheart.

But it was maddening to Harold.

He shrugged his shoulders, in a token that he accepted her terms, and she came back to him.

Naturally he was disappointed at another defeat. There was another dance, after which they returned to the table in a calmer mood.

Once more Wayne was bewildered with the elusive spirit of her. Determination settled upon him, hard and cold, to win her.

He remembered having heard that a faint heart never wins a fair lady. He examined himself to find symptoms of faintness. There was none.

Chapter 185

SURRENDER

BETTY PROCTER sat smiling as her lover coolly informed her that she must marry and settle down — that she couldn't expect to be a head-liner and a stage favorite always, that life on the vaudeville stage was trying and wearing, that every woman needed a protector and a home of her own.

Betty laughed aloud at this.

"Harold," she cried. "I make five hundred dollars a week. I have an engagement that calls for forty weeks of the year of steady employment. I could work the whole year around if I wanted to. Why should I marry and give it all up?"

He had no reply to this.

"And, of course, I would not marry unless I were perfectly willing to give it all up," the girl went on. "You must not forget that I shall have the responsibilities of a mother. Now that is serious. I want my baby to have everything of the best. That is my solemn duty. I wish I could make you understand all that, dear. And," she added, "you may not like the idea of supporting the child of my first husband."

The young man shook his head stubbornly.

"You know how often I told you that I would love your child as if it were my very own," he said in all earnestness. "Is that not enough? Your baby shall have the best education money can procure. My business permits——"

She silenced him with a gesture.

"Please—please, dear boy, don't make it so hard

for me to refuse," the girl pleaded. "I think we had better go home."

As she rose he rose also and made ready to leave the place.

While he was assisting her with her coat, he was in a desperate frame of mind. He wanted her—yes, he must have her. He thought of another argument to win her to his way of thinking.

She put him off with a counter argument, however, that was logical and sound. His last hope seemed gone.

Then Harold Wayne decided that is was useless to say any more. Nothing he could say had the desired effect. He had loved and lost, and each time she denied him he had felt his love grow deeper and his yearning for her quicken.

As he settled himself with her in a taxi that was to take them home, he felt that life ahead of him could be nothing but drear and empty and cold.

And it pained him more than he could have expressed in words that she had changed since going back to the stage.

She was no longer the helpless, timid young girl he had rescued that night on the street from the hands of a ruffian.

She was a full-grown, self-reliant woman who knew her strength and the value of her beauty and ability.

It seemed that he was not to have her.

It was not because he had gone wrongly about the task of winning her—he decided, for he had tried every method he could imagine.

He admitted to himself that this wonderful creature was not meant for him. And Harold Wayne was pretty much of a fatalist about such things.

He said little or nothing as the taxi rolled through the streets.

Betty Procter watched him with a half smile that glimmered even through the darkness, and that aroused a sullen anger within him.

"There—there, Harold, don't pout," she soothed. "Be a good boy. If Mrs. Armond is still up when I get home, I'll take you in for a bite to eat. And perhaps we can find a cold bottle of something. Come now, cheer up."

His smile in answer to hers was rather sad.

It was not long before they reached home. The taxi drew up at the door of Mrs. Armond's boarding house.

There they dismissed the vehicle because Wayne said that he'd rather walk the short distance to his own home. Besides, she had promised him something to eat if Mrs. Armond was still up.

This would give him another little while with Betty.

With his heart feeling a new hope, he followed her into the house. The hall was but dimly lighted. They were groping in the gloom and walked carefully.

But it was not altogether a fear of stumbling that was behind his caution.

Wayne was afraid that if he made the slightest noise he would bring all the other boarders down upon him, and he would be driven out, away from his happiness of being a little while longer with Betty.

Mrs. Armond, they found, was not up. It was past one o'clock and she had gone to bed hours ago.

"I am sorry," the girl said, turning to him, "I don't like to disappoint you. But I suppose we'll have to say good-night without anything to eat."

His heart sank with the weight of his disappoint-

ment.

He could say nothing, nothing except a whisper born of the despairing thought that he was going to lose her.

"Betty, I want you to be my wife," he said.

She made a wry face at that, and turned from him, opening the door with one hand while negligently holding the other out to him for a good night grip.

Her face, he could see, already was turned from him.

All the sting of his failure, all the rebellion against her indifference to the message that meant the world to him, all the anger at her refusal to bid him hope, came over him in a flash.

At the same time, beyond repression surged the desire that he hold her in his arms and take those pouting lips for himself and crush her to his bosom.

He was silently debating whether or not he would have the courage to defy her anger.

The reverence that had kept him always in awe and solemn before her was now torn away, and a human longing was in its place.

With an inarticulate cry he caught her in his arms.

So fierce was the sudden impulse that he had no fear for her whisper—a rather frightened whisper. He only knew that he held her and would hold her for a little while in spite of her struggles.

He kissed her—first on the lips, and when these were snatched away, on the cheeks, eyes, throat and hair.

Wayne buried his face in that mass of auburn hair and remained thus for several seconds, like a man drinking deep after a long thirst.

The girl's hair suddenly loosened, tumbled down

on them both, seeming to draw them and hold them.

The touch of it also came somehow to restore Wayne's being to a state more nearly rational, and with awakening consciousness he knew that she had ceased to struggle, and lay passively in his arms.

He had not been able to win her by his deep love and humble adoration. He had thought to take her by his strength.

He should have known that it would be the end of everything between them.

Well, he would take one more kiss to serve him as a memory, and then go away never to lay his eyes on her again.

Then the entirely unexpected happened.

Betty returned his kiss with a fierceness and a passion that matched his own.

His arms fell from her, but now her arms held him.

"Harold—Harold," she murmured. "Love me—love me, and hold me forever."

Again she was in his grasp, and he held her until she cried out with pain. No longer did her lips evade his. They returned what his took from hers.

At last he put her from him, staggering like a drunken man.

"Betty -- Betty!" he stammered, holding her at arm's length.

Their eyes were hanging on to each other. Betty had capitulated and he saw it.

But there was still a certain degree of doubt gnawing at her heart. Perhaps she was making a mistake. It was swept away presently, for Harold Wayne said in a low quivering tone:

"I want you to marry me, Betty. I could never be happy without you."

The answer was already on her lips, but she held it back.

"Harold," she murmured, moving a step away from him, "do you know what this means to you?"

"What, dear?" came back quietly.

"Asking me to become your wife."

"It will mean life-long happiness for me, sweetheart."

Her smile was charming, yet there was an element of fear in it.

"Are you quite sure about that, Harold?" she inquired gravely. "You must be absolutely sure. I have told you that I am to become a mother. I may have to give up dancing temporarily in another month.

"The people with whom I am associated do not know that I buried my first husband not so long ago. There may be ugly talk and ——"

"Whoever tries to throw slurs at you better be careful," Wayne interrupted in a steely voice. "As my wife I shall protect you from all that."

"Yes, I believe you will," agreed Betty. "But, I wonder if you could love the child of another man. If you didn't, I should be miserable. And then there is another thing to consider. I may want to go back on the stage after my confinement. What about that?"

Wayne had suddenly become serious.

"Betty," he said, reaching for her hand, "I have promised you repeatedly that I would love your baby as my very own. I shall keep that promise. But so far as our returning to the stage is concerned, I shall probably object. It would hurt me to have my wife working.

"And that is not the worst. As a married woman on the stage you will be in constant danger. I know what men usually think of a married woman behind the footlights.

"Too many things are taken for granted in such cases. Now, I am selfish enough to want you all to myself. Even your dancing shall be done in the home I shall provide for you. Is that asking too much?"

"You are asking a great deal, Harold," Betty said.

"I am asking only what every man who truly loves a woman can ask," he told her soberly. "To see you working on the stage after our marriage would be a humiliation to me.

"Men will get the idea that I am not able to support you, and that you——"

"What a sensitive boy you are," she broke in, then placed a finger on his lips. "Well," she smiled happily. "I would rather have you that way."

"Would you?" He took her again in his arms.

"Yes, dear."

His breath was upon her burning cheeks and she returned kiss for kiss.

"I want you to marry me at once," he cried. "Tomorrow, if you will. I have already a cozy home in view and shall close the deal for it. Every day of my life will be devoted to making you the happiest woman in the world."

Betty snuggled close to him.

"And you will love me and my baby always?" she breathed. "Always?"

"Until death!" came back fervently. "Until death!"

Arm in arm they walked to the door. For a long moment Betty stood there staring into the lighted street after her lover was gone.

She felt a sense of relief, but she also experienced something akin to fear. It seemed as if an inner voice was trying to warn her.

Finally she walked up the stairs to her room.

Seated on the edge of the bed, she murmured:

"His wife! I have promised to marry the man who was accused of having had an affair with my sister. But he will be good to me, I know. And he will love my baby."

Alone at home in his room, Harold Wayne was also indulging in reflections.

Not for a moment did he regret having asked Betty Procter to become his wife. He had not asked her to marry him on the spur of the moment, and in the throes of passionate desire.

He loved her sincerely and deeply.

"I wonder what her sister Alice will say when she finds out that Betty is my wife," he murmured. "And Philip Gordon! Never did I dream that one day I would be his brother-in-law."

When he fell asleep he was troubled with unpleasant dreams. Between him and his beautiful young wife stood a barrier in the shape of a stone wall he tried vainly to cross.

Gradually the wall was dissolved into mist, and through that mist he could see the features of a man. And as he kept on staring another face became visible.

It was that of Betty Procter. She was smiling encouragingly at the man. Slowly their lips met in a kiss.

He awoke with a low moan, and the perspiration stood out on his forehead in great big beads.

"No, such a thing could not happen," he breathed as he followed the unpleasant trend of the thoughts the scene in the dream had produced. "I trust Betty, and I'd kill the man who'd try to come between us."

But Harold Wayne's dream was destined to come true. For another man already stood between them.

For in spite of his great show of unselfish interest in Betty, Mr. Jamison, the man of millions, loved her.

And he was cherishing a certain hope.

He too, had his dreams. He was ready to make any sacrifice to see that dream become reality.

And although slightly past middle age, Mr. Jamison easily passed for a man in the neighborhood of thirty-five or forty.

His family connections were of the best, and in addition to his wealth, he had tremendous influence.

Chapter 186

HOME AGAIN

CONDITIONS at the Gordon home had not changed much. Mr. and Mrs. Gordon, so the society column said, were still enjoying an extended trip through Palestine and the Holy Land, and would not return home for another two months at least. It seemed that Phil and Alice wanted to make sure that they were not drawn into the scandal brought on by Betty's disgraceful affair with Fredericks.

The two Gordon children were well taken care of by the faithful Annie. Regularly once a week she wrote a letter addressed to "Miss Marie Desmond, General Delivery, Belvidere, Florida."

It was here that the unhappy mother of Harry and Phyllis smiled and wept by turns when reading those intimate messages.

She was waiting patiently for kind providence to restore her to the position now held by another.

Marie had undertaken the task of brightening the life of Lillian Crawford, also a victim of capricious fate.

She enjoyed sitting on the veranda of their cozy cottage with the wide expanse of the Atlantic ocean spread out before her. There was soothfulness in the murmuring of the restless waves.

"God protect those near and dear to me," was her prayer every morning upon arising and each night before she went to sleep. "Protect him, who is still my husband in Your sight, and those innocent children, our offsprings."

The prayers were being answered, it seemed, for Phil had found something to take his mind off his worries on that trip.

And the children received the care of Annie, whose mother instinct had been strongly developed.

Marie was very much disturbed about the young girl in her charge.

Lillian Crawford appeared to be pining away. She did not know that Victor Talbot had been acquitted of having murdered Roger Hawkins. Her heart remained heavy and sad.

"Oh, why don't I hear from him," she wailed morning, noon and night. "What have I done to deserve this indifference on his part."

But poor Lillian did not know that her stepmother had carefully prevented any such possibility. She had sent the girl to an obscure place more than a thousand miles away.

Then she had gone to Victor Talbot with a faked letter which told of Lillian's stay among friends and a probable marriage to another man.

Although Talbot had refused to believe this, he became more and more convinced that the girl he loved so dearly had been weaned away from him.

His greatest disappointment came when she failed to appear at the trial.

He had counted on her being in the court room to encourage him in the darkest hour of his life.

His unexpected acquittal was robbed of its pleasure by Lillian's absence.

And so, downcast and with a heavy heart, Victor Talbot wended his way homeward.

As he opened the gate which led from the country road into the grounds of his estate, he was greeted by the furious barking of his two faithful dogs.

"We belong to you," their continuous barking seem to say. "And we believe in you, though all the rest of the world still doubts your innocence."

It was really a bitter home-coming for Talbot. Being acquitted of murder by a jury because of the lack of evidence, had left him under a cloud.

Even as he left the building he had seen men and women glare at him with suspicious eyes.

On his way home he had bought a newspaper which gave the full details of the trial. The article ended by saying that, although he had been acquitted, it did not vindicate him in the eyes of the world.

Small wonder then, that he was in a disagreeable mood as he made his way slowly toward the house.

Suddenly he felt a pleasureable thrill. What if Lillian Crawford had heard of his acquittal and was already here to greet him in his old home! Oh, this would be recompense for all the bitterness of the past months.

The joy of such a meeting would wipe away all that lay behind him.

His gait became more brisk and his carriage erect; the look with which he regarded his home grew more eager.

What beauty there was in the rays of the setting sun piercing the net-work of foliage so that they seemed dipped in liquid gold.

What charm in the delicate outlines of the trees against the clear blue sky! There was an atmosphere of peace and rest which soothed his troubled soul.

He was at the threshold. The door was already being opened and Mrs. Ruggles, in holiday garb, came forward to meet him.

Her delight beamed from her good old face, as, with outstretched hands, she greeted her master.

"I thank heaven you are here again!" she cried.

"God bless your return! Now all is well again."

Deep emotion was reflected in Talbot's face, pale with its prison pallor. Warmly he grasped her knotty hands.

"Pray God, Mrs. Ruggles, that He may soon reveal the guilty man." he replied devoutly. "Not until then, will all be quite well; I cannot take pleasure in life before the murderer is found. I am free, but my freedom is bought with disgrace.

"I thank you for your good wishes, Mrs. Ruggles. You will never know how I have missed my home." He turned away, for his heart was full.

With tears in her eyes, the old woman followed him. She knew best what he had most missed in his imprisonment.

"A faithful soul!" said Victor to himself. "After all, everyone is not forgetful and ungrateful."

He made for his room. What if Lillian were within to surprise him! His heart jumped as he cautiously opened the door. He looked about; but no slender maiden ran to him joyfully.

Instead, he found Mr. Lee, the manager whom he had appointed to take care of his affairs during his absence. Their meeting was constrained.

There was something searching in the man's eyes as though he thought—"He has been acquitted, but is he innocent?"

Talbot dismissed him by requesting him to meet him at supper time. He felt as though his throat was in a choking grasp. He seemed a stranger in his own home.

At the table, the strain was particularly great and the talk dragged heavily between them.

His estranged feeling did not leave him even when Mrs. Ruggles brought in the meal and flittered about

him with affectionate care.

It was the thought of Lillian which depressed him. He had longed for only a sign or a word from her, but there was nothing—not even a line.

Lee, his manager, intimated that perhaps he would no longer be required. Talbot, however, requested him to stay on for some time at least, as his health was affected by his long imprisonment, and he would need some time before he was himself again physically; and he intended to go away, perhaps on the morrow.

This seemed very agreeable to Mr. Lee and was evinced by a certain change in his manner. But Victor remained grave and reserved—he could not overcome his first impression.

In the course of their conversation, Lee mentioned that Warner had given notice and wished to leave service as soon as possible. Talbot colored. This struck him like a blow in the face.

This man, upon whom he had heaped kindness and benefits, was the first to desert him, and he had always considered him a good, upright fellow.

But faithfulness and devotion must be tried in fire, and Warner's did not stand the test. He was bitterly disappointed.

"Naturally, I told him to give notice to you himself," continued Lee, "as I do not wish to make any changes among your people if I can help it."

"Certainly, I will speak to him," replied Talbot.

Immediately after supper, when he was alone, he had Warner called.

Sullenly with eyes downcast, the latter entered. He had no word of congratulation or cheer for the man who had been so good to him. Victor regarded him very gravely.

"You wish to go away?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. Talbot."

"And why?"

A long pause—Warner fingered his cap in embarrassment. Talbot breathed heavily; he could not help being hurt at meeting such ingratitude.

"Well, why do you wish to go away?" he demanded. "You must have a reason."

Sulkily, Warner looked up, but his eyes could not withstand his master's gaze.

"I want to make a change," he said, "I reckon I might just as well tell you I'm engaged to a rich farmer's girl in the village. And she says she wants nothing more to do with me if I stay in your house, so I'm going."

A quiver passed through Talbot's tall figure, a flush of anger came into his face and his right hand was clinched as he said:

"That is to say, that it is a disgrace to serve a man who has been accused of murder. Is that so? Answer, Warner!"

The man did not look up. Embarrassment and obstinacy struggled in his face.

"Well, that's the way they talk about it," he answered sheepishly. "I've got to listen to my girl, I could not find as good a one again in a long while."

Talbot sighed deeply. His face showed his torture . What this yokel said was undoubtedly public opinion about him Whoever stayed with him was also disgraced.

What a terrible future to look forward to! The veins in his temples swelled — his chest labored as if struggling with an immense load. He realized the battle he would now have to commence with the world in its unjustified opinion. Who would be the victor?

But he would show no weakness before this low-minded fellow. Quietly and apparently indifferent he

said to Warner:

"Very well, I only ask you to stay until I return from a short trip I am going to make."

Warner, glad that the interview was at an end, quicky left.

Talbot remained in a rankling mood. His heart was sore, and fresh shocks were to be encountered at every step. How was it all to end?

Had Mrs. Crawford, after all, spoken the truth when she told him that Lillian could never be his under these conditions.

Perhaps she, too, feared that she would be disgraced through him. Oh this world—ever ready to doubt and condemn.

With a terrible laugh he threw himself on a couch and ran his fingers through his hair. This then, was his regained freedom! Soon his house would be avoided as though it was pest-stricken.

But let the world do as it wished, if only one remained for him, the one whom he loved boundlessly, who was immeasurably more to him than all else the world had to offer.

He resolved to ascertain early in the morning just where Lillian was.

Face to face he wished to stand before her, and only if her own lips said, "I love you no more, I cannot be yours," would he believe Mrs. Crawford's insinuations.

In his perturbation, he did not notice that the door had been quietly opened and that Mrs. Ruggles had hesitatingly come in.

As she again closed the door, he saw her, and he rose hastily.

No doubt she was another who did not wish to live in the same house with a disgraced man!

Continued in next number

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